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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 002119

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TAGS: PREL PGOV TU

SUBJECT: TURKISH POLITICS: OPPOSITION CHP LEADER BAYKAL

HUNKERS DOWN

REF: ANKARA 1905

(U) Classified by Political Counselor John Kunstadter.
Reason: 1.4 (b,d).

¶11. (C) Summary: Opposition CHP chairman Baykal and his allies in the party continue their campaign of denial in the face of fierce intra-party criticism. Their hold on the party leadership appears solid for now, following a marathon of recent meetings in which CHP members at all levels -- most of whom owe their jobs to Baykal -- re-affirmed their support for the CHP chairman. However, the leadership's inability to evaluate its policies critically will further undermine support within the rank and file and will undercut what little credibility the party has with ordinary citizens. End summary.

In For The Long Haul

¶12. (C) Amid growing calls for wholesale change in the party leadership, main opposition CHP leader Deniz Baykal and his increasingly shrinking circle of allies are digging in their heels. In the party's 6 April Parliamentary Group meeting, which lasted over 11 hours (group meetings usually conclude after two or three), Baykal picked up where he left off at his now notorious post-election press conference (reftel). According to our contacts in the party and mainstream press, Baykal asserted that despite a negative media campaign against CHP, the party still received 18 percent of the vote. He also claimed that without him as party leader, CHP would have won less support.

¶14. (C) In a subsequent meeting with poloff, Baykal's chief advisor Bulent Tanla not surprisingly echoed his boss, to whom Tanla owes his political career. Tanla - a former pollster for Gallup -- told us that the municipal election results represent neither a victory nor a defeat. "It depends on how one looks at the data; in information theory, there are facts and how one views those facts. A a result, no point of view can be said to be wrong," he argued. He conceded that CHP lost around 200,000 votes when compared to Nov. 2002 but added that "we still received 5.6 million votes; that's the population of Belgium."

¶15. (C) Although utterly convinced that CHP is on the right path, Tanla revealingly said that ordinary citizens listen to CHPers speak, then listen to AKP members speak, and vote for the party whose representatives sound most like themselves. In this case, as in Nov. 2002, it was overwhelmingly AKP.

¶16. (C) In an April 12 meeting, CHP Diyarbakir M.P. and close Embassy contact Mesut Deger confirmed to us that Baykal is not going anywhere soon. Deger explained that Baykal convened both the party assembly and provincial chairmen on April 10-11 in Ankara. Both groups -- whose members owe their jobs to Baykal -- gave the CHP leader a vote of confidence, according to Deger, suggesting that change is not in the offing. Deger added that the party is awaiting the results of a research committee -- headed by Tanla -- that is reportedly evaluating the election results in detail.

Opposition Meaningless

¶17. (C) In his remarks to Parliament, Baykal criticized intra-party opposition -- particularly former State Minister Kemal Dervis, who recently published a lengthy report on social democracy in Turkey that criticized CHP policy. Baykal pointedly said he will not change party policy on Iraq, Cyprus, or on the headscarf issue. Any effort to do so is an effort to turn CHP into ruling AKP (AKP lilestirmek), he asserted.

¶ 18. (C) Like Baykal, Tanla was dismissive of opposition in the party, even though nine prominent M.P.s, including Embassy contact and party executive board member Hakkı Akalin, had just called for Baykal to resign. Tanla suggested that discontent is the point of equilibrium for a CHP Parliament group, adding that opposition inside the party had always existed since the time of Ismet Inonu, Ataturk's right-hand man. As if searching for any theme that could mollify the party's critics, Tanla asserted that the party needs young faces, although he could not explain how that might happen. Without prompting, Tanla rejected the possibility that Dervis could mount a serious challenge: "I meet with Dervis all the time; he doesn't even want to be leader."

¶ 19. (C) CHP Denizli M.P. Mehmet Nessar, who serves on Parliament's NATO assembly and who is normally free of knuckleheaded thinking, told us recently that the thrust of Dervis' criticism is that: 1) Baykal has refused to accept new members into the party; 2) CHP provincial and district level officials are only out to benefit materially from their positions; and 3) the party is stuck in the 1930's. While conceding that Dervis' points are true, Nessar nevertheless claimed that Dervis would have been better served if he had worked behind the scenes versus expressing his criticisms aloud.

Comment

¶ 10. (C) As we noted reftel, CHP's problems run deeper than Baykal. Indeed, Tanla himself said that "the party's problems have nothing to do with the party's leader; changing personnel won't solve problems." Yet it is difficult to see how the party under Baykal will ever change in the way that a small number of more forward-thinking CHP members hope.

¶ 11. (C) We continue to be struck by CHP's total lack of connection to the common man here. As Hacettepe University sociologist/anthropologist Suavi Aydin told us April 12, CHP is now seen as merely the party of a close-minded elite. In this regard, Tanla's admission that voters choose parties whose members resemble themselves in speech and manner is especially revealing. In another instructive example, Tanla questioned Secretary Powell's recent remarks on Turkey and Islam. Tanla suggested that Turkey is getting poorer and that education levels are falling (while avoiding acknowledging CHP's direct share of responsibility for this trend). Tanla wondered whether the Secretary sees Turkey in the same light and is therefore predicting that Turkey will become an Islamic Republic.
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